



SLEEP AND ITS DISORDERS IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

In literature, sleep and how it manifests reflect complex sides of human nature, whether it be the way it manifests by its disorders, sleepwalking, or even dreaming. This paper shows possible representations and differences between sleep and its disorders in literature to understand its significance in poetry and how authors depict it. A clear idea can be made by analysing different examples and passages of books/poems and how sleep is involved in them, either making it a symbol for innocence or, conversely, a symbol for paranoia and guilt when its disorders are involved. This study also highlights the past and development of sleep and its disorders in literature, contributing to the field of literary studies and psychology by analysing the different interpretations. This research also argues that by understanding how sleep is portrayed in literature, you are indirectly educating yourself on the effects sleep and its disorders have on people, including history and overall societal perceptions.

KEYWORDS: Sleep Representation, Sleep Disorders, Literary Symbolism, Psychological Themes, Literature Analysis, Cultural Portrayal of Sleep

INTRODUCTION

“To sleep, perchance to dream,” quoted William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. Sleep, a time for rest and dreams, is not only vital for our well-being but is also a recurring theme in literature, reflecting its impact on humans’ day-to-day lives. Sleep is often a symbol for innocence, peace, and restoration in poetry, as studies have proved that a good night’s rest helps with an overall better quality of life, reduces stress, and enhances cognitive functions. While sleep deprivation, on the other hand, does not let millions of people get the benefits of peaceful sleep, often resulting in daytime fatigue and other health issues.

So, how does the existence of sleep disorders impact poetry? Sleep disorders like insomnia, sleep apnea, and narcolepsy plague a lot of people, ruining their mental and physical health. In poetry, they resemble guilt and paranoia, perhaps of a past regret. Literary writing frequently shows the link between sleep disorders and health, highlighting the psychological and physical toll they take on people. Examples of health issues caused by sleep disorders are the increased risk of cardiovascular disease and glucose intolerance—prediabetes that could lead to type 2 diabetes. As ongoing studies are still exploring sleeping patterns, it is important to know how authors take advantage of what is already known about sleep and its disorders to give their work a subtle yet valuable insight into societal perceptions, historical contexts, and the human condition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review delves into how sleep and its disorders have been depicted across time, highlighting shifts in understanding influenced by medical, cultural, and psychological advances. By examining works from classical to contemporary literature, the review uncovers the evolving portrayal of sleep as a metaphor

for innocence, guilt, and psychological complexity.

The theme of sleep and its disorders in literature has been around for a while, and the more information comes out on it, the more it reveals insight into the human mind and cultural concerns. Various literary scholars have analysed possible interpretations, such as Clark Lawlor and Ashleigh Blackwood in their research article “Sleep and stress management in Enlightenment literature and poetry,” published in April 2020. Their article talked about sleep’s association with pressure and unhealthy lifestyles, delving on its physical attribute yet also on its attribute to poetry during the ‘age of reason.’

Similarly, Megan G. Leitch’s book, published in 2021, *Sleep and Its Spaces in Middle English Literature*, is also groundbreaking in this field. It examines the sleep concerns that were overlooked due to the studies that were more focused on what sleep enables and what it stands for, and Leitch argues that sleep mediates questions in ways that have ethical and affective implications, all while simultaneously representing different Middle English genres: romance, dream, vision, etc. Leitch also believes that “In medieval English imagination, sleep is an embodied and culturally determined act, both performed and interpreted by characters and contemporaries.”

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a secondary qualitative methodology to explore the representation of sleep and its disorders in literature. The study is based on an in-depth review of scholarly articles, classic and modern literary works, and existing analyses that focus on the symbolic and thematic use of sleep in various genres. This approach is well-suited as it leverages comprehensive sources to provide rich interpretations of

how sleep and its disorders have been portrayed throughout different literary periods. However, a key limitation of this methodology is its reliance on pre-existing literature, which may not encompass recent interpretations or newly discovered perspectives.

ANALYSIS

The portrayal of sleep, both peaceful and disturbed, in literature varies and could take a lot of forms. Still, its main use is the fact that it reveals psychological and physical depth: as a symbol of composure and as a metaphor for psychological unrest and/or existential angst. Take William Wordsworth's poem "To Sleep," for example; it reflects on the poet's longing for a fresh sleep. He's struggling with insomnia—a condition that renders individuals practically sleepless. Wordsworth made sure to use imagery from nature to portray the sense of peace that comes from sleep, as you can see in the following passage:

"A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by,
One after one; the sound of rain, and bees,
Murmuring; the falls of rivers, winds and seas."

This signifies sleep's role in providing comfort, especially after having it stripped away. Conversely, in literature, sleep can not only be pictured as a source of comfort but also as a strong metaphor for deeper existential struggles when disorders are involved. Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a good example. "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a masterpiece about an unnamed narrator trying to convince the reader of his sanity while simultaneously describing a murder he committed. It is a good example of sleep disorders in literature because the narrator shows clear signs of insomnia and paranoia, as seen in the passages: "And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight," where the narrator talks about the process he went through to examine the old man while he was sleeping, all night. Additionally, the narrator's insomnia is a reason for his obvious preexisting mental illness to worsen even more, as sleep disorders have been proven to aggravate mental health. It all aligns with the narrator's descent into madness and obsession towards the old man's eye, the man whom he murdered, quoting, "His eye would trouble me no more."

Comparing Edgar Allan Poe's short story with William Wordsworth's poem can explain how sleep is portrayed in literature; Wordsworth's poem describes sleep as peaceful and consistently uses a gentle tone throughout the poem, whereas Poe dove into the madness (indirectly) caused by sleep deprivation and used an intense tone to emphasize the story.

However, this was not how sleep and its disorders were always depicted in poetry. The understanding and representation of sleep have improved significantly over time, reflecting big changes in medical knowledge, cultural ideas, and literacy trends. In early literature, sleep was often depicted in mystical or supernatural terms. Ancient Greek and Roman texts frequently used sleep and its disturbances to represent divine intervention or punishment, as seen with the Greek Hero, Orestes, who was punished with sleepless nights and eventually driven to madness by the Furies [Goddesses of Vengeance] after killing

his mother to avenge his father's murder. His story is told in various works, most notably Aeschylus's trilogy *Oresteia*.

It was only when 'The Age of Reason' period took place that there was a more rational and scientific understanding of sleep. "Eloisa to Abelard" by Alexander Pope is a poem that was published during this era. It talks about Eloisa's conflict between her love for God and her love for Abelard. In this poem, sleep is mentioned multiple times to portray her complex feelings and the forbidden freedom she desires. For example:

"Then conscience sleeps, and leaving nature free,
All my loose soul unbounded springs to thee.
Oh curs'd, dear horrors of all-conscious night!"

This portrays Eloisa's consciousness being at rest, making her feel free from moral guilt and societal constraints. However, at the same time, Eloisa recognizes that it is bad and this leaves her feeling guilty prominently during night time. Overall, the enlightenment period marked the start of a more nuanced delve of the mind-body connection in literature, where sleep and its disorders were finally linked to human state and experiences.

Following the Enlightenment period was the Romantic era, starting in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. People during this era were objectively affected by the Enlightenment period; thus, the books published during this era were more focused on emotional and individual aspects. Furthermore, it was around this time the infamous book *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley was published. It painted sleeplessness as a consequence of intense guilt and/or trauma: "I passed the night wretchedly: sometimes my pulse beat so quickly and hardly, that I felt the palpitation of every artery; at others, I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness." This passage talks about the sleepless night Victor had in consequence of his immense guilt and fear of what he has created.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the rise of psychology helped transform the literacy picture of sleep even more, as seen with the works of Franz Kafka and his focus on the inner mind and the impact of isolation and alienation, and later, Sigmund Freud's theories of dreams and unconscious, and how they influenced many authors. Sleep during this era was mainly used for deeper conflicts and traumas, as seen in Franz Kafka's book, *The Metamorphosis*. While sleep itself does not play a major role in addressing the problems in Kafka's book, it serves as the moment of transformation for the protagonist, Gregor Samsa.

The Metamorphosis is about Gregor, who became an insect overnight and thus became unimportant and disgusting to his family. It showcases themes of existential crises and the absurdity of human relationships in such a unique way that Kafka did not want to be even minutely misunderstood—so much so that he asked the publishers not to make the cover an insect because it is not really about the man turning into an insect. "The insect itself cannot be depicted," Kafka said.

In present-day literature, since sleep and its disorders have a clearer understanding, modern authors can successfully mix

both traditional ideas and scientific understandings of sleep. For instance, *Sleep Donation* by Karen Russell is a novel set in a dystopian future where insomnia has become a fatal disease, leaving many people unable to sleep and thus facing severe health consequences and eventually death. Reflectively, dreams are perceived as a way of understanding yourself and the unconscious mind, so the lack of them leads to a loss of personal identity and societal cohesion, which possibly was one of the main factors for all the problems Russell explored in her novel, such as the exploitation of the sleep donation system.

In the preceding paragraphs, we compared different ways of using sleep as a metaphor and discussed its historical evaluation. Now, we will go even deeper and examine sleep and its various manifestations—supernatural points, sleepwalking symbols, insomnia portrayal, and dream meanings in literature—all of which are more examples of ways authors use to describe their characters' inner worlds and states.

Literature has long been fascinated by the intersection of sleep and the supernatural, exploring how it could manifest symbolically in characters' lives; for example, sleepwalking. It is used as a metaphor for subconscious desires and/or repressed emotions, blurring the lines of dreaming and awareness. A perfect example of this is *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. In Shakespeare's story, his character 'Lady Macbeth' experiences multiple sleepwalking episodes, revealing her suppressed guilt as she deals with the consequences of the murder she was found complicit in in Act 5, Scene 1.

Furthermore, insomnia in fiction has been used as a symbol for many different ideas, including previous points we talked about such as mental illness. However, it has also been used as a way of introducing awakenings, as seen in novels like Stephen King's *Insomnia*. The protagonist, Ralph, has turned sleepless as a consequence of losing his wife, which resulted in him perceiving auras and other hidden paranormal layers of reality.

Dreams, with their surreal appearance and symbolic ideas, provide authors with creative ways to explore and reveal their characters' subconscious fears, desires, and conflicts. From Freudian interpretations to Jungian archetypes, dreams in literature offer insights into the depth of the human psyche. In Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, dreams become a main part of creating portals to alternate realities, mirroring the main characters' quest for identity and existential meaning. Similarly, in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's feverish dreams expose his guilt and moral decay.

Therefore, by examining how authors use these literary devices, supernatural elements, sleepwalking, insomnia, and dreams, we gain a deeper understanding of their narrative techniques and creativity. Through literature, sleep and its disorders are merely plot devices used as tools to portray the complex sides of human nature.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of sleep and its disorders reveals a lot of different meanings and insights that go deeper than

initially realised. Through examining works like Wordsworth's poem "To Sleep," Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart," and Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, one can start to see sleep as not only a biological need but also as a metaphor for things like guilt and innocence. These literary analyses highlight the complexity of humans while also bringing more light to usually misunderstood themes like fear and desire. Moreover, by examining the literature in this paper, one can gain a deeper understanding of how cultural and societal perceptions change and evolve towards sleep.

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